



An Encounter with James B. Reston, Jr.
January 22, 2003

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1. James B. Reston, Jr.

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Excerpts from: *Contemporary Authors Online*. The Gale Group, 2002.

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“SIDELIGHTS”

American author and journalist James B. Reston, Jr. writes both fiction and nonfiction, sometimes combining both. Plays, novels, biographies, and television documentaries are among the various formats categorizing his larger works. For his subjects, Reston often draws from history's major socio-political events and figures, from President Richard Nixon to the crusading leaders of the first millennium. He commonly addresses destructive or warring elements of society and has repeatedly presented history as a vivid story. Reviewing Reston's book *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*, an Economist critic stated, "Well aware that war makes for a rattling story, he devotes his gift for words to the construction of a thrill narrative, unashamedly infused with what he calls 'elemental romance.' His heroes are caricatures whose personality traits transcend the facts." While critics have found this style riveting, not all have appreciated his interpretation of facts and infusion of fictional elements.

Reston explores the Jonestown mass suicide-murder of 1978 in three different forms: as a documentary on public radio; in a book-length study of Jim Jones's commune; and in a semi-fictionalized play. Winning access to a series of recordings of the Jonestown colony's proceedings, Reston "has succeeded in extracting startling connections and meanings from the transcripts of these tapes," observed Malcolm Boyd in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. In addition, remarked Robert Coles in his *Washington Post Book World* review, Reston "tries hard in *Our Father Who Art in Hell* to give us some philosophical distance on this recent horror." The critic elaborated: "Reston's eye is novelistic; he has followed the tracks of a movement's downward slide, and is in a position to give us careful details. . . . He strains to explain. And he does so, at times, with the good judgment of a writer willing to avoid certain faddish modes of analysis." While Peter Schrag faulted the book as "flawed both by uncertain purpose and by an excessive tendency to . . . speculations of various obvious sorts," he admitted in the *Nation* that the tape transcriptions are invaluable and the "book makes clear how much of a tall tale Jonestown really was." Reston's play *Jonestown Express* conveys this same idea, as Richard Zoglin suggested in *Newsweek*: "At a time when dramatists are shying away from 'big' social issues . . ., [in *Jonestown Express*] the message comes through with clarity and power: it could happen again; it could happen here."

In *Sherman's March and Vietnam*, Reston "unearths unusual and thoughtful metaphorical parallels between William Tecumseh Sherman's way of war [during the U.S. Civil War] and the conduct of the war in Vietnam," wrote Brian Burns in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. *Washington Post Book World* contributor Russell F. Weigley related, "By breaking down one of the major limits restraining the violence of war, Reston contends, Sherman accustomed American soldiers to regarding such limits lightly. [Sherman's march] pointed the way to subsequent, larger

violations, destroying lives as well as property." In pursuing this theory, the author "traces Sherman's march, seeking to find out what the man was like and to measure his impact on the ethics of modern war," summarized Stephen W. Sears in the *New York Times Book Review*.

In addition, Reston contrasts the resolutions of the two wars, pointing out that while dissenters in the Civil War were given amnesty, neither side involved in the Vietnam debate was given a substantial resolution. Sears found this portion of Reston's account, which "examines why a dozen years after the Paris peace accords . . . the wounds of the Vietnam era are still unhealed," convincing. Weigley likewise noted that "some of the most eloquent passages of Reston's book return to searching the Civil War for possible guidance toward escaping the divisive emotional legacy of Vietnam." While the critic faulted the author for "indulg[ing] in ambivalence and complexity," he concluded that *Sherman's March and Vietnam* is "stimulating," for "the lasting damage that Sherman perpetrated against restraint in war is a theme worth emphasizing."

Reston looks further back in history for *The Last Apocalypse: Europe at the Year 1000 A.D.*, which portrays major factors in Europe's transition into a ruling Christian civilization. Various factions, among them individual kingdoms, Vikings, barbarians, and Moors, were at large in Europe; and in the years leading into the second millennium, they were being destroyed or conquered and converted to Christianity. The mass social changes occurring, rather than any one cataclysmic event, created an apocalypse, according to Reston, who openly used elements of fiction to give readers his history lesson. "Clearly, while Reston is chronicling the overall Christian triumph, he also is mourning many of the cultures that were lost," wrote David Crumm in a Knight-Ridder/Tribune New Service review. "It's often difficult to determine whether Reston is giving us verifiable facts or a slice of literary lore. In either case, he has an eye for unforgettable detail." Reston uses "a breezy magazine style that hits the highlights of history," assessed Crumm. "He lays out scores of colorful anecdotes and sprinkles them with a dry wit." Although *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reviewer Steven Harvey also found the book to be a page-turner, the critic felt Reston's book was too heavily weighted in gory details and overly depended on fiction for his sources. "What we get are the exaggerations of literature in a lively paraphrase," contended Harvey. However, other reviewers, such as Europe's Robert J. Guttman, assessed Reston's style of presentation more positively, more simply recognizing the work as "a lively and engaging book."

Focusing on two principal characters, Richard the Lionheart and Saladin, Reston again explores the crusades in his next book, *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*. When writing this work Reston set out to "knock away the barnacles that have encrusted both of the characters," the author told Ray Suarez in a *NewsHour* discussion, referring to the typical Arab approach to Saladin "as a demagogue," Richard the Lionheart's persistent association with "Robin Hood lore," and the general dominance of the Cambridge school of history in the documentation of the Crusades. *Washington Post Book Review* contributor Tariq Ali recommended Reston's book as "a refreshingly unbiased popular history of the Third Crusade (1187-92)." Reviewers of *Warriors of God* again praised Reston for his exciting and vivid presentation of history, noting his flare for presenting drama, sometimes in a somewhat fictitious manner. Geoffrey Moorhouse noted Reston's skill at telling a story and "illuminating detail," but in the critic's *Guardian* review he wrote that "*Warriors of God* sometimes reads like a campfire yarn told in the American Midwest." In a more positive review, *Library Journal* contributor Jim Doyle maintained that Reston "offers the reader

a captivating story in a lucid and often humorous style." "The varied landscapes of the Holy Land are described with the visual awareness of a topographical painter, and both the ecstasy and the horror of medieval warfare are tellingly evoked," stated Julian Rathbone in *Sunday Telegraph*.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born March 8, 1941, in New York, NY; son of James Barrett (a journalist) and Sarah Jane (a journalist; maiden name, Fulton) Reston; married Denise Brender Leary, June 12, 1971. Education: Attended Oxford University, 1961-62; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, B.A., 1963. Avocational Interests: Woodcrafting on a lathe. Memberships: Authors Guild, Authors League of America, PEN, Dramatists Guild. Addresses: Home: 4714 Hunt Ave., Chevy Chase, MD 20815. Agent: Timothy Seldes, Russell & Volkening, 50 West 29th St., New York, NY 10001.

AWARDS

Dupont-Columbia Award, and Prix Italia (Venice), both 1982, both for *Father Cares: The Last of Jonestown*; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1982; Valley Forge Award, 1985, for *Sherman's March and Vietnam*.

CAREER

U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC, speech writer for Secretary of the Interior Morris Udall, 1964-65; Chicago Daily News, Chicago, IL, reporter, 1964-65; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, lecturer in creative writing, 1971-81; writer. Military service: U.S. Army, Military Intelligence, 1965-68; became sergeant.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *To Defend, to Destroy* (novel), Norton (New York, NY), 1971.
- *The Amnesty of John David Herndon*, McGraw (New York, NY), 1973.
- (With Frank Mankiewicz) *Perfectly Clear: Nixon from Whittier to Watergate*, Quadrangle (New York, NY), 1973.
- *The Knock at Midnight* (novel), Norton (New York, NY), 1975.
- *The Innocence of Joan Little: A Southern Mystery* (nonfiction), Quadrangle (New York, NY), 1977.
- *Sherman, the Peacemaker* (play), first produced in Chapel Hill, NC, by the Playmakers Repertory, 1979.
- *Our Father Who Art in Hell: The Life and Death of Jim Jones*, Quadrangle (New York, NY), 1981.

- Father Cares: The Last of Jonestown (radio documentary), first aired on National Public Radio, May, 1981.
- Eighty-eight Seconds in Greensboro (documentary; first aired on PBS-TV's Frontline series, 1983), WGBH Transcripts, 1983.
- Jonestown Express (play), first produced in Providence, RI, by Trinity Square Repertory Company, May 22, 1984.
- Sherman's March and Vietnam, Macmillan (New York, NY), 1985.
- The Real Stuff (documentary), first aired on PBS-TV's Frontline, 1987.
- The Mission of Discovery (documentary), first aired on PBS-TV, 1988.
- The Lone Star: The Life of John Connally, Harper (New York, NY), 1989.
- Collision at Home Plate: The Lives of Pete Rose and Bart Giamatti, Edward Burlingame (New York, NY), 1991.
- Galileo: A Life, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1994.
- The Last Apocalypse: Europe at the Year 1000 A.D., Doubleday (New York, NY), 1998.
- Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade, Doubleday (New York, NY), 2001.
- Scriptwriter for David Frost, The Nixon Interviews, 1976-77. Contributor of articles to New Yorker, National Geographic, Saturday Review, New York Times Magazine, Washington Post Magazine, Omni, Esquire, New York Times Book Review, Time, and other periodicals. Regular fiction reviewer, Chronicle of Higher Education, 1976-77.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

Father Cares: The Last of Jonestown was adapted as a sound recording by National Public Radio (Washington, DC), 1981.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- Atlanta Journal-Constitution (Atlanta, GA), March 15, 1998, Steven Harvey, "Atrocities Committed en route to Culture," p. L11.
- Atlantic, October, 1989.
- Booklist, September 15, 1989; January 1, 1998, Ilene Cooper, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 742; June 1, 2001, Margaret Flanagan, review of Warriors of God, p. 1832.

- Boston Globe, February 10, 1985.
- Catholic Historical Review, January, 1995.
- Economist, October 20, 2001, "Stirring Stuff; The Medieval Crusades."
- Europe, December, 1999, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 47.
- Guardian (London, England), October 20, 2001, Geoffrey Moorhouse, review of Warriors of God, p. 8.
- Houston Chronicle (Houston, TX), July 15, 2001, Lee Cearnal, "Novel Muslim vs. Heartless Lionheart," p. 18.
- Isis, September, 1995.
- Kirkus Reviews, February 15, 1998, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 251.
- Kliatt Young Adult Paperback Book Guide, July, 1999, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 34.
- Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service, March 4, 1998, David Crumm, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 304K6295.
- Library Journal, March 15, 1998, Norman Malwitz, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 82; May 1, 2001, Jim Doyle, review of Warriors of God, p. 108.
- Los Angeles Times Book Review, April 26, 1981; March 17, 1985; June 19, 1994.
- Nation, May 2, 1981, Peter Schrag, review of Our Father Who Art in Hell.
- National Review, April 16, 1982.
- Newsweek, June 1, 1981; June 4, 1984.
- New York Review of Books, June 27, 1991.
- New York Times, May 25, 1984.
- New York Times Book Review, February 17, 1985; November 26, 1989; July 7, 1991; April 5, 1998, David Walton, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 25; June 24, 2001, John D. Thomas, review of Warriors of God, p. 24.
- Publishers Weekly, February 16, 1998, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 192; March 12, 2001, review of Warriors of God, p. 79.
- South Carolina Review, spring, 1998, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 172.

- Sunday Telegraph (London, England), October 14, 2001, Julian Rathbone, "A Just, Right, and Holy War?," p. 14.
- Washington Post Book World, April 5, 1981; February 10, 1985; November 12, 1989; June 5, 1994; September 12, 1999, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 10; June 4, 2001, Tariq Ali, "The King and the Sultan, " p. C4.
- Washington Times, May 4, 1998, Julia Duin, "America Not Ready to Greet Millennium, " p. 2.
- Wilson Quarterly, spring, 1998, Toby Lester, review of The Last Apocalypse, p. 102.

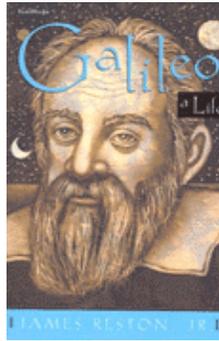
OTHER

- Online NewsHour, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/> (August 3, 2001), Ray Suarez, discussion with Reston about Warriors of God.
- Savvy Traveler, <http://savvytraveler.com/> (November 1, 2001), James Reston, Jr., "Iran Postcard."

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2. Book Reviews

2. Book Reviews on Galileo



Galileo: A Life by James B. Reston Jr.

From Bruno Maddox - Washington Post Book World

It is to James Reston's credit that his masterful new biography of Galileo Galilei manages to capture... the Renaissance as colorfully as it does, without making his subject seem too much like some time-traveling hero from a more sensible age... a brilliant biography.

From Los Angeles Times Book Review

A spirited evocation of Galileo's charisma and capacity... fresh, sinewy, and altogether admirable.

From William A. Wallace - America

A great outpouring of books on Galileo has been seen within the last two decades, many of them written by and addressed to Galileo scholars, though a smaller number were written for the general reader. . . . James Reston's *Galileo: A Life* is difficult to situate in the Galileo genre. It has some features in common with Pietro Rendondi's *Galileo Heretic* (1987) and with Mario Guiducci's *Galileo Courtier* (1993), but it lacks their scholarship and so is perhaps better compared with Berthold Brecht's *Galileo*. Reston, too, is a dramatist and a writer. . . . His portrayal of Galileo is a character study in five parts. . . . Reston has read widely and bases his exposition partly on texts and partly on legends, using elements of both to achieve the desired effect.

From Booklist

Reston's previous books have spotlighted military or cult leaders, politicians, or sports figures. So *Galileo* is a departure, but because science and its collision with theology in the early seventeenth century is new territory for Reston, he is able to transform it into fresh terrain for all his readers, even those most familiar with Galileo's tragic tale of genius and persecution. Reston brings this star-gazing, intuitively intelligent, original, articulate, witty, theatrical, self-promoting, cash-poor, and nearly inexhaustible Italian Catholic to life in an involving and, yes, suspenseful narrative. Acquaintance with the facts does nothing to diminish the drama, and Reston's zealous research,

judicious use of excerpts from letters, poems, and church documents, vivid descriptions, and frank indignation over the church's appalling treatment of his hero enliven every page. We feel the shock and wonder Galileo felt when he looked through his first perfected telescope and saw the mountains and craters of the Moon, the dance of the moons of Jupiter, and the surprising movements of sunspots--dangerous but undeniable observations that stood in sharp contrast to the Vatican's sanctioned view of the universe. We also empathize with this brilliant man as he pesters those in power for university appointments, money, and permission to publish his world-altering texts. Reston has composed vigorous portraits of Galileo's loyal supporters and vicious enemies while illuminating the political turmoil of his times. Reston also makes clear his dissatisfaction with the Vatican's 1992 "formal recognition of error" in its handling of Galileo's inquisition: it's just too little, too late. *Donna Seaman*

From Kirkus Reviews , April 1, 1994

This readable biography of the 17th-century scientist and mathematician is long on politics and personality and short on science and math. Reston (*Collision at Home* plate, 1991) divides Galileo's life in three. Since there is no wealth of information on the developmental years and early career, they are handled quickly. Galileo's rise is given in greater detail, especially his search for patronage, his intense defense of his work in the face of religious and intellectual resistance, and his ridiculing counterattacks on plagiarists and intellectual thieves. Reston assumes we know Galileo's achievements in the sciences and so spends little time on them. Instead, he builds the biography around two aspects of Galileo's character. The first is his political instincts, which on the one hand led to a fawning attitude to secular and ecclesiastical patrons, and on the other to a powerful use of his pen in attacking intellectual opponents without regard to political implications. The second trait Reston focuses on is Galileo's intellectual self-assurance, which kept him from understanding the anti-intellectual resistance to his work. These political implications come back to haunt Galileo, as the third part of the book shows in chronicling the scientist's fall. Reston devotes the major portion of his book to Galileo's trials. He creates a well-rounded portrait, convincing the reader to appreciate Galileo's mood swings, his intellectual arrogance, and his final capitulation as behavior to be expected from the man portrayed. He is as good exploring the politics of Counter- Reformation Italy and the anti-intellectualism of the conservative elements of the Church, and weaker on why and how Galileo's work was potentially heretical. He successfully portrays Galileo's world, with its colorful group of Renaissance Italians. Readily accessible, the book is an interesting character study and political biography of the great scientist. -- Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

From Ingram

Vividly depicting the brilliant scientist and dramatically portraying the turbulence and richness of the era in which he lived, a chronicle of Galileo's career focuses on his invention of the telescope, which forced a dangerous confrontation with the Inquisition.

From Owen Gingerich, Harvard University

James Reston, Jr. paints a vivid yet sensitive portrait of Galileo: his effervescent friendships in the rich intellectual milieu of the Venetian Republic, the brew of excitement and egoistic paranoia that accompanied his astronomical discoveries with the telescope, the annoyances of a derelict brother and the lawsuit over his sister's dowry, the agony of the trip to Rome to face the Inquisition. It is a dramatic story, often told, but never as compellingly as this

From The Washington Post

A brilliant, masterful biography.

From Los Angeles Times

Fresh sinewy, and altogether admirable.

From William A. Wallace – America

A great outpouring of books on Galileo has been seen within the last two decades, many of them written by and addressed to Galileo scholars, though a smaller number were written for the general reader. . . . James Reston's Galileo: A Life is difficult to situate in the Galileo genre. It has some features in common with Pietro Rendondi's Galileo Heretic (1987) and with Mario Guiducci's Galileo Courtier (1993), but it lacks their scholarship and so is perhaps better compared with Berthold Brecht's Galileo. Reston, too, is a dramatist and a writer. . . . His portrayal of Galileo is a character study in five parts. . . . Reston has read widely and bases his exposition partly on texts and partly on legends, using elements of both to achieve the desired effect.

From A reader (Amazon.Com)

Reston does a lot with this. He captures the bad side of the Pope's insistence that Galileo refrain from describing the surface of the moon as anything other than perfectly smooth, shiny, and sinless. Because of course Adam and Eve had not sinned up there. Like Galileo, Reston also catalogues some of the surface imperfections of his subject, and what they suggest about his mindset and his world.

The family portrait of Galileo's two daughters, both shunted off to a convent, is tragic, and Reston penetrates this sub-unit of his topic convincingly, getting into how one daughter became pious, while another become embittered. The idea of using the Church for refuge for your daughters is interesting, since the same Church was leaning on Galileo.

This book is a great tour of the man behind the discoveries, the math equations and the historic controversies. The feel of the Italian city states of the Renaissance also comes out in this book, and it's no coincidence that the family and clan-based capitalism of Galileo's patrons had to precede or lay the groundwork for someone of Galileo's talents to really produce something.

This book is hard to put down. Good to take on a vacation.

From Paul Perdue (psperdue@aol.com) from Augusta, Georgia, U.S. (Amazon.Com)

In what could be considered an early case study and fore-runner to the famous Scopes monkey trial in the United States, the story about Galileo's life and unfortunate clash with the Catholic Church is a tale of humanity that unfortunately, never seems to die. James Reston has been able to accurately portray the dangerously volatile environment which often germinates when science and religion collide with each other, and he has done so within the framework of a life that was

pure genius. It is not often easy to step back and to objectively juxtapose a beautiful life with the darkness of injustice and religious intolerance. James Reston's book has been able to accomplish just such a feat.

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